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ABSTRACT

A classroom research project in Alaska explored what role dramatic play and story reenactments have as a teaching/learning method for young childrens' development. A review of the literature identified several common elements that helped teachers elicit successful dramatic story reenactments: choosing a familiar book or story; encouraging adaptations of stories to fit the needs of the group; directing as little as possible; and avoiding getting caught up in the final product. The students and the teacher began by reenacting familiar fairy tales and folktales. The 12 students in the class formed two groups to work on reenacting "The Three Little Pigs." The students enjoyed the reenactments and wanted to reenact their stories again after seeing the other group's reenactment. The students then moved on to reenacting unfamiliar fairy tales. The addition of a puppet stage with a variety of puppets was successful, and showed how language, cooperation, story comprehension, oral expression, and imagination are all developed in this creative play. The teacher was surprised and excited at the transformation the students made into various kinds of characters by just putting on a different shirt, hat, or skirt. The dress-up area soon became one of the most popular places in the classroom. Students developed higher-level thinking skills as they made decisions about characters, plot, and setting in reenacting their characters. They developed social skills as they listened to others' ideas and learned to compromise in the choices they made as a group. (Contains 14 references.) (RS)

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Enhancing Creative Dramatic Play and Story Reenactments In a Primary Grade Classroom

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Summary / Abstract

This classroom research project explores what role dramatic play and story reenactments have as a teaching/learning method for young childrens' development. A search of the current research reveals the benefits and techniques for using creative dramatics, along with an account of a second grade teacher's adventure in applying this information in her own classroom.

It all began on a cold Alaskan winter day, with temperatures dropping to -30° F. My second graders were spending another recess inside. As I looked around the room, some children had chosen to play board games, others were drawing pictures, and some were building things with pattern blocks and unifix cubes. A group of first graders came in to ask me if they could borrow some hats froms my hat box. They were all excited because they were making up a play to do for their classmates. As I gave them the box of hats, I realized that my students had never just "spontaneously" acted out a story or made up a "play" for their classmates. I began really asking myself why my students weren't doing this type of dramatic play. As a class we had put on several plays, such as *The First Thanksgiving, Big Grunt and the Little Egg,* and a dramatic reenactment of *Where the Wild Things Are.* The students LOVE to perform, however on their own, they really did not take the initative to do dramatic play or reenactments. Thus, I embarked on an enlightening and exciting project of how to increase dramatic story reenactments in my classroom. I also wanted to find out what role dramatic play and story reenactments have as a teaching/learning method for young childrens' development.

Why should dramatic story reenactments be included in an early literacy program?

Play, including dramatic story reenactments (DSR), is an important way that children construct knowledge (Fields & Spangler, 1995). In DSRs, children informally recreate familiar stories by acting them out themselves or by using puppets. Props and costumes are used very little or not at all. There is no formal "script" and it is mainly a child-directed, child-created activity. Higher level thinking skills are developed because

children are creating the roles and actions themselves. They have to make choices about characters, plot, action and setting. Their sense of how a story "works" is greatly enhanced through this process (Martinez, 1993). In a study done by Pellegrini and Galda (1982), kindergartners and first graders who reenacted stories had better recall and comprehension of those stories than other students who reconstructed stories in teacher-led discussions. Second graders in this same study who had reenacted the story, had richer retellings, and understood more fully cause and effect relationships, as well as being more sensitive to the emotional responses of the charcters. In a Joint Committee on the Role of Informal Drama in the Classroom, the National Council of Teachers of English and the Children's Theatre Association (1983), state that "Informal classroom drama helps participants develop improved skills in reading, listening, speaking, and writing." (NCTE & CTA, 1983, 370) They go on to say that written and oral skills are developed as well as promoting vocabulary growth. Students also will read with more of a purpose for what they will need to know in order to do the drama.

In addition to enhancing story comprehension and relationships in a story, McCaslin (1987) contends that there are numerous other values that can be gained through creative drama and play. She contends that certain values exist in some degree, regardless of age or previous experience. These included the following:

Development of Imagination

Imagination is the beginning. "Few activities have greater potential for developing the imagination than playmaking....Once the players have had the fun of seeing, hearing, feeling, touching, tasting, or smelling

something that is not there, they will find that their capacity to imagine grows quickly." (McCaslin,1987, 8-9.)

Development of Independent Thinking and Group Cooperation

As a group of students plan their story reenactment, each member may express his ideas, thus contributing to the whole. As the members work together "...they learn to accept, appreciate, and stimulate one another." (McCaslin,1987, 9) Although this cooperation is not always easily achieved, (as evidence in my own classroom), creative drama does allow for great opportunities to share ideas and solve problems together. There is also a need for the participants to concentrate and pay attention in order to respond to the other group members.

A Healthy Release of Emotion

By becoming an active participant instead of a passive spectator, children have a chance to feel and release emotions that are often restricted by watching television and movies. "All persons feel anger, fear, anxiety, jealousy, resentment, and negativism. Through the playing of a part in which these emotions are expressed, the player may release them and so relieve tension." (McCaslin, 1987, 10) The important thing is that a student can personalize the drama through a feeling or experience that they have had in their own life, thus making a connection with their interaction with the text.

Enhances Oral Communication

Creative drama also motivates a student to express himself in order to be heard and understood. Opportunities to develop voice expression, volume, and speed are naturally built into participating in a creative drama.

Experience With Good Literature

A major value of creative drama/story reenactments is becoming acquainted with good literature. "The story that is played makes a lasting impression." (McCaslin,1987, 11) It is nothing new to teachers that the stories that hold students interest the longest are those of the best literary quality. "Believable characters, a well-constructed plot, and a worthwhile theme make for good drama." (McCaslin,1987, 11) Folk tales and fairytales are wonderful stories to dramatize. They have stood the test of time.

It is clear that there are many values of including dramatic story reenactments and other forms of creative drama and play in an early literacy program. The question is then how can we best elicit creative dramatic play into a classroom setting?

Eliciting Creative Dramatic Play

As I purused the research done on creative dramatic play/story re-enactments, I found that there were several common elements that helped teachers elicit successful dramatic story reenactments. First, it is very important to choose a book or story that is familiar to the children. This follows the premise of McCaslin that stories that have withstood the test of time make for good drama. Folktales/fairy tales such as "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," "The Three Little Pigs," and "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" are perfect for dramatizing. The students are familiar with the plot and can identify with the characters and events.

Secondly, it is important to encourage adaptions of the stories to fit the needs of the group. For instance, changing male characters to female characters, or making "mother" characters into "father" characters. It is

also appropriate to allow for varying numbers of characters, such as having four bears instead of three, or two trolls instead of one. Allowing for changes in some of the traditionally violent endings of most fairy tales to less bloody endings can be a great creative opportunity for the children. In other words, make a good story better by changing it to fit your needs. (Williamson & Silvern, 1986; Ishee & Goldhaber, 1990)

Another common element to successful story re-enactments is the teacher should start out as directive as needed. Keep in mind that the teacher's role is really to support the children's interactions. Some "training" of students may be necessary inorder for them to know that they need to identify the characters, review the events, choose a part, and gather some props if necessary. Overtime, the teacher wants to be more of a facilitator and less directive. However, in order to reach the long-term goal, it is necessary to "train" them in the mechanics until it becomes second nature. (Williamson & Silvern, 1986)

This also involves teaching children good ways of resolving conficts as they arise. A teacher does not want to be the problem-solver of every disagreement. By teaching children how to solve conflicts they will also take more ownership of the reenactment process.

Finally, it is important not to get too caught up in the final product. A relaxed "non-Broadway production" atmosphere in the classroom will lead to story reenactments being regarded as a regular part of the children's activities. It seems to be important not to have much rehearsal time in a formal sense. "...it seems to be the process of the planning and the informality of the production that lead to increased abilities in the cognitive and social areas, not the repetition of several rehearsals." (Williamson & Silvern, 1986, 5)

Although a relaxed "non-Broadway production" atmosphere is important, Ishee and Goldhaber (1990) point out that the most important part of story reenactments is allowing for many repetitions of the play with children taking on different parts, or changing certain actions in the story. Repetition of the reenactment allows for children to take on a variety of roles and offers opportunities for them to elaborate and expand on the story each time it is played.

Embarking on the Classroom Adventure

As I began to contemplate where to begin in this project, I identified several areas that I wanted to focus on. These included: Reenacting familiar fairytales/folktales, reenacting non-familiar folktales, creative dramatics through puppets, and providing materials/opportunities in my classroom for more spontaneous creative dramatics. With these areas in mind, I began the adventure.

I decided to start with the story of "The Three Little Pigs". Of course all my students were familiar with it. I read them two versions of the fairytale. In both versions the pigs "went out to seek their fortune". In Nina Barbaresi's version, the pigs' mother told them it was time for them to leave home and go out on their own. In Walt Disney's version the first two little pigs were characterized as being lazy and carefree. All they wanted to do was dance and play their fiddle and flute. The third little pig was characterized as a hard worker and very smart. In Nina Barbaresi's version the three little pigs characters were not as developed. In each version, the pigs met a person from whom they bought the straw, sticks, and bricks.

I divided the class into two groups. One group had 5 students and the other had 6. They each went off to act out the story. I was interested in how they would work together and decided who was going to do what. Although I knew the research I had done said that I should do some "training " I decided to just let them "go for it" and see what would happen. I also wanted to see what version of the "Three Little Pigs" they would decided on.

It was clear that there would be some conflicts as to who would play which part, but as in so many cases, one or two of the students became "leaders" and were actually quite diplomatic about roles. I noticed that there were a few children who were obviously unconfortable with "acting out" and others were very "dramatic". As they chose the props for their scenes and where the action should take place, I became the advisor for each group. I did not spend too much time with either group, but fluctuated between them. I gave them enough time to play through the story twice. Each group changed the roles they played without any suggestion from me. It was as though that was the natural thing to do. I thought is was also interesting that each group chose someone to be the narrator. Desks and chairs became houses and chimneys. Although I did not suggest adapating the stories to fit the needs of the group, the children in one group had no problem figuring out that they could have the narrator also be the person who sold the pigs their straw, sticks, and bricks.

After they had played through the story twice, the groups wanted to perform for each other. This is when there were some definite conflicts. When it was time to actually "perform" for an audience, it became very important as to who would be what character. When they were reenacting

in the beginning, there were very few conflicts. I think this reenforces the idea that a "non-Broadway production" atmosphere is very important to free children from being product oriented. I also think this was due to the fact that in the past we had mainly been doing reenactments where there was a "production" atmosphere. For them, certain roles were more important than others.

We enjoyed each others reenactments, and then the children wanted to go back and reenact their stories again. I soon realized that by observing the other group, they realized some new ideas that they could incorporate into their own drama. There are a couple of students in my class who are natural actors/actresses. They were wonderful models for my other students. This caused me to reevaluate the progression of this project. I felt a need to work with my students on some ways to express feelings and actions with their facial expressions and body actions.

Although this was somewhat a diversion from my original plan, I decided to focus on identifying feelings that we all have. I read the book *Feelings* by Aliki. I also had a poster of children showing the facial expression of different feelings. Before I read the story or showed them the poster, we brainstormed feeling words. The student who thought of a feeling word would come to the front and show us how they looked with their face and body when they felt that way. We all then made our bodies and faces look like that feeling. It was a great way to talk about feelings and also work on our dramatic skills by showing with our face and body posture what our characters may feel. We identified about 15 different feelings. The next day we cut out pictures of people from magazines and glued them on paper. The children then wrote what kind of feeling they thought that person was having. It was interesting to me how at first the

children were very hesitant to label anyone's feelings. I told them they should use other feeling words besides happy, sad, bad, or glad. This caused them to really evaluate the facial and body postures of those people in their pictures. I had a Feeling Words chart of feeling words we identified the day before. I told them to try and find examples of some of these words. The most common pictures found and labeled were "Upset" , "Surprised", "Loving", and "Worried". Some children found pictures they thought represented "Bored" and "Curious". Overall, I feel it was a good lesson to reinforce the feelings and the expressions we have when we are feeling that way. The purpose of this was to help my students become better at visably showing these feelings in their dramatizations.

The next day I played a game called "Freeze 1-2-3" from the book "*Games Children Should Play* ", by Chihak and Heron, (1980). I gave the children an instruction to move in a certain way such as "swimming through jello" or "eating an ice cream cone." They were to do these kind of motions until I said "Freeze" and then I would give them another movement to try. This was lots of fun and I saw marked improvement in their expressions from the week before. For a more directed dramatization project, I then had several one-page scripts that I had collected throughout the years. (I do not have an original source cited.) These were silly skits that reminded me of the kind of things we did at summer camp. I thought they would be good because they were short, at my students' reading level, and they all involved pantomiming some sort of action. Sometimes there were directives given and sometimes not. I let the students choose which script they wanted to work on. They then went off in pairs to different parts of the room to practice. Memorization of the scripts was not a requirement. As I went around the room to check on

progress, I sometimes would give suggestions for movement, but mostly I just observed. At first, most of the children did not elaborate much on the movement except where directives were given. But as I asked them questions about how the characters might feel, or what would you do if that happened to you, they began to realize that they could be more free to do what they wanted with the script. This helped enormously. I was expecting/hoping for much more as far as pantomime, but as it turned out, I know that these are the "baby steps" to becoming more dramatic in their expressions. I was hesitant to use a scripted skit, as my goal is to increase dramatic retellings on an improvisational level, however I do think it helped the students understand how much meaning can be expressed through our faces and bodies.

The next part of my project was to reenact another familiar story to see if these exercises in identifying feelings and actions through facial and body expressions would help the children in their story reenactments. The students unanimously wanted to reenact the story of "The Three Billy Goats Gruff". We read the story several times and the children joined in the repetitive dialogue. As we broke into two groups, it was clear that the children were not going to have any trouble reenacting this great story. One of the groups had just enough people as there were characters. The other group had one more person than original characters, so they just automatically had "Four Billy Goats Gruff". All that I had read about encouraging adaptations was absolutely the most natural thing for my students. The freedom to create and embellish a favorite story was all they needed to be successful. None of the groups wanted to change the bloody ending of the troll being beaten by the biggest billy goat. (I think that the boys in my class had a lot to do with that decision.) Desks

became bridges, and a variety of hats helped set the scene and characters. They reenacted the story over and over until each person had an opportunity to play each character. They never tired of it and the voice expressions of each billy goat and the awful troll were absolutely wonderful. It was easy for them to make their bodies express the body weight of each billy goat. I was especially impressed with one of my students who played the troll. He twisted his arms and neck to be as grotesque as possible. His facial expression and voice were ugly and mean sounding. I truely believe that the exercises we did helped the students to express the feelings and personalities of the characters. Being a good actor was not my purpose, however in order to better understand why characters do or say the things they do, I feel my students must be able to relate to them on a more personal level. That is also true in understanding the stories they read. Students must be able to connect ideas they already know about to make sense of new ideas.

I decided that my students should try to reenact a story that they weren't very familiar with. In fact most of my students had never heard the story of "The Talking Eggs" by Robert D. San Souci. We read the story three times before I suggested to them that we reenact it. The students seemed very excited about retelling it, and many were discussing which character they wanted to be. I recalled how Williamson and Silvern (1986) had emphasized the importance of the students knowing the specific events in the story. Since this was not a familiar folktale I thought it would be important to go through and identifiy the main events. As a whole group we made a story sequence map so the events of the story were clear in the minds of the students. I also divided the students into small groups in which they completed a story map which included

characters, setting, plot/events, main characters, and the problem. This was a very successful cooperative group lesson that helped reinforce the story events and the characterizations.

In my research, Rosalind Flynn and Gail Carr (1984) had collaborated as a drama specialist and a classroom teacher to explore using drama with classroom literature. Flynn suggested that one important strategy for maintaining the focus of the literature and engaging students in action requires the teacher at times to take an active role in the drama. Carr indicated how "teaching-in-role" helped her to be a part of the dramatization, yet not be "in charge". I thought that I would try this technique in our first non-familiar story reenactment. I could help the children get into their parts and also help out in the recall of story events if needed. Before we began we divided the story in to six scenes. In each scene we had new students play different parts. In a few scenes, (the ones with the chickens and the cow), everyone was able to participate. There became no real flow to our story, as we stopped and discussed and changed the placement of things to fit the scene we were reenacting at the time. By going through this reenacting process, I observed students talking about the characters, discussing what they would do in the same situation, and truely understanding the theme of the story. One of my students said, "I know what the author is trying to tell us. He wants us to know that it is good to be honest and kind to others!" This type of understanding would probably not been as clear to that student if she had not participated as the mean, selfish, sister. By playing that role, she was able to relate to why her character did not receive the jewels and riches that the other sister obtained.

Many of my students had problems with making up the words the

characters would say. Because this story was not as familiar they weren't as comfortable with the dialogue. There also is not as much repetitive dialogue in this story. It was very clear how important this is to young students. They seemed to want to know "exactly" what they should say. However, I did have three students who really got into their characters. Chrissy was an excellent "Old Woman" and she actually had dialogue that was very similar, but not exact to the book. Garrett volunteered to be the old woman when no other boy would even think of it. He loved putting on an old scarf and talking like an old lady. The others went into laughing hysterics. But after I praised him for being such a good sport, other boys volunteered. For some who were NOT going to be girls, we just changed the characters to a brother and an old man, or a mean father. The favorite characters were the chickens and the talking eggs.

The story mapping we did prior to the reenactment was very helpful to the students. These were posted around the room, and several times they refered to them to decided what should happen in the scene we were reenacting. I played the part of the wicked mother throughout the story drama. Since the mothers character had some authority over the daughters (or in our case, daughters and sons), it was easy for me to direct some of the action without being too noticeably in charge. I really enjoyed myself and I found that I could model for the students some of the voice expression and body language that we had been working on. We only reenacted the story twice, but we all agreed that was enough of the "Talking Eggs"-- unlike the more familiar stories which they could have played over and over and over.

For the rest of my classroom research, I wanted see what kinds of things I could provide or change in order for my students to spontaneously

reenact the stories that they had been reading or were familiar with. I decided to make a puppet stage out of a large cardboard box. I covered it with contact paper and put wooden supports to help keep it stable. It can fit on top of a desk, so it is easy to use in my already crowded classroom. I borrowed a box of puppets from the Kindergarten/First grade room. I only have a few of my own puppets, so that will be my next project--to acquire/make puppets for the puppet theater.

The first day I just put the puppet stage in the classroom and told the students that they were welcome to use it during our free reading time or Center time. At first, only one or two students even went over to it. Many of the students picked up the puppets and started right in with imaginary talk. Since most of the puppets are animals, it was fun to watch them interact with each other using different voices to bring their characters to life. During this first encounter, they hardly ever used the puppet stage--they just held the puppets and talked back and forth. "I'm going to get you!" and "OH NO, Help!, Help!" Most of their play was nonsensical--there was no story being told. I had three students (Chrissy, Robin, and John) ask if they could use the puppets during our D.E.A.R. time. I wish I had had my camera. They set the puppet stage up right in the middle of the door going outside on the porch. There interactions included the two girls behind the stage and John in front of the stage. They all interacted with one another. At first I thought John was being the audience, but when I walked over there, he had a tiger puppet and was being the aggressive villian, while the girls were screaming and giggling about how he couldn't get them. Periodically, he would lurch toward them and growl. I couldn't really follow any story line, but I think they were "playing" in a way to familiarize themselves with the materials.

Throughout the following weeks, the puppet stage area became very popular. I found it interesting that the stories that they retold we almost all fairy tales. One group was really into "Goldilocks and the Three Bears". I also observed a group of girls acting out the familiar song of "Little Bunny Foo, Foo". The puppet stage acted as a prop sometimes--such as the house where the Three Bears lived. At other times, one or two students would be the audience while the others played out a story.

Adding a puppet stage with a variety of puppets was such a success. I think that having a large collection of puppets that fit fairytale characters would be a good place to start in setting up this center, as the majority of the stories they wanted to retell were fairytales. Children can also make their own puppets to go with the stories they want to tell. In the future, this will be something I will spend much more time developing and using with my students. The creative dramatics that I observed showed how language, cooperation, story comprehension, oral expression, and imagination are all developed in this creative play.

Another change I made in my classroom, in hopes of increasing creative dramatic play, was adding to my Dress-up Clothes and Hat boxes. I have a fairly good collection of hats for my Hat Box, however, I didn't really have very many dress-up clothes. Again, I asked around and borrowed as many things as I could find. As I introduced the box of clothes and reminded them of all the various hats, masks, and funny noses that I had, you could see the excitement rush over their faces in anticipation of putting on the clothes. Since my class has only 12 students, I allowed everyone the opportunity to explore and dress-up all at once. I can't tell you how surprised and excited I was at the transformation my students made into various kinds of characters by just

putting on a different shirt, or hat, or skirt. It wasn't long before I felt it was getting a little chaotic. There were five or six different scenes of action going on all over the place. I didn't observe any story reenactments this first day. Mostly the students were telling each other who they were and trying to get their voices to sound like a character. "I'm a princess!" "You can be my horse." "Hey, do I look like a Mexican in this hat?" "How do Mexicans talk?" "I'm a crocodile and I'm going to eat you up!" It was great fun and opened my eyes to the incredible affect that costumes, no matter how small or elaborate, can have on ones imagination. (Of course, when I think about it now, I realize that is why going to the theatre and reading a good story is so rewarding--it allows our imagination to take us to places we've never been before!)

The dress-up area soon became one of the most popular places in the classroom. Within a week I had a group of boys asking me if I could get out the big ship (made of cardboard--about 7 feet long) that we had made for our Mayflower around Thanksgiving time. They wanted it to be Captain Hooks' ship. One of the boys had just read a shortened version of Peter Pan and thought that we should all act it out! Great!!!!! This is what I was hoping would happen. Soon they were all deciding who would be each character. Everyone in the class was anxious to be involved. As they began to decided on what events they would act out, it was obvious to me that the majority of the students were not that familiar with the entire story line of Peter Pan. So, we sat down and read the Walt Disney version through twice. After that, they took off on their own. I ended up being the narrator, mainly because they wanted more pirates and lost boys. For about a week, we reenacted this wonderful story over and over. Students switched back and forth between roles, gave each other tips on how Peter

Pan should stand, etc. It wasn't long before someone asked me if they could reenact the story for the Kindergarten and First graders. Well, of course!

Although the reenactment of Peter Pan turned out to be more of a "production" in the end, it started out with a few students wanting to retell a wonderful story. I saw a remarkable improvement in problem-solving and cooperation in my students. The quality of the retelling, got better and better as they figured out new ways of expressing the plot action and the characters' personalities. I really enjoyed that although I was involved in the process, I was not "in-charge". It was truely a collaborative effort--a classroom of learners helping each other accomplish a goal.

As I reflect on the past few months of the adventure with creative dramatics, I see some new goals for myself and my students. For next year, I am planning on providing more opportunities at the beginning of the year for reenacting familiar stories. It will be important for me to provide a casual atmosphere that encourages spontaneous and informal creative dramatics. Williamson and Silvern (1986) describe a teacher who reinforces this atmosphere by having the "audience" stay where they are as they watch the reenactment, and then return to what they were doing. I also feel that by taking an active role in some of the drama's I can facilitate opportunities for students to actually defend or argue for something about their character. This could be a wonderful opportunity to role play similiar situations in their own lives that were the same problems the characters faced in the literature. Once the children learn the framework for interacting with one another, creative dramatics could be applied to social studies and science units also. The activities we did

with identifying and expressing feelings was also beneficial, not only for dramatic expression, but also because young children don't always have the vocabulary to express their own feelings. I also realize that I need to provide more time for creative "play". In order to enhance dramatic play, I need to develop more prop boxes that provide dress-up clothes and props that the children can use to exercise their imaginations. I will continue to add to my puppetry area. The need for puppet characters that are found in familiar fairytales and folktales is very clear to me now. The experience that my class had with Peter Pan led me to the conclusion that it is worth involving the whole group in the dramatic action. When all the students were actively participating, they were much more productive. There was obviously valuable kinds of learning taking place when we worked together as a whole.

In conclusion, the use of creative dramatics in a classroom-from primary to secondary-has more value than I ever imagined. From my own classroom research and experiences, I have seen how higher level thinking skills are fostered as the children made decisions about characters, plot, and setting in reenacting their stories. My students developed incredible social skills as they listened to others ideas and learned to compromise in the choices they made as a group. Their oral language improved as did their vocabulary. As they played the characters, they practiced voice expression and body movement to express the feelings and personalities of their roles. The students' imagination and creativity was given the freedom to develop wonderful retellings that helped them to personalize the story and enhance it's meaning for them. Most of all, I discovered that exposing children to excellent literature is only the beginning. As teachers, we must continue to allow children to get involved with the

literature in as many ways as possible so that the literature becomes meaningful and a true learning experience.

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